



AN EXPLORATION OF THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING FOR IRISH SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMEs) DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Research dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements
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11 September 2020

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submitted for the degree of MSc in International Business and Global Brand Management is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of others, due acknowledgement is given.

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother and my superhero Rashida Munshi and my late grandfather Mohammed Bashir Munshi. A single woman who has given me the world. You taught me never to give up from a young age and here I am today completing my master's degree. Raising me by yourself since I was two, your wish was for me to be educated and mama I have done it. I have achieved it all because of your support. Thank you for understanding I could not travel to see you in Malawi because I had to save up for my maters. I will forever be grateful for your support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to explore the role of social media marketing on Irish SMEs by assessing the benefits and challenges of social media adoption during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was informed by the need to carry out an empirical analysis on the current state of social media usage amongst SMEs in Ireland, by discovering how well they used social media for business promotions and awareness, especially during the COVID-19 Era. Social media has become an essential tool in 21st-century marketing (Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012). Due to its flexibility, ease of usage and ability to reach a wide range of individuals the tool has been adopted by a variety of industries. Reports have revealed that the adoption rate of social media by SMEs in Ireland is gradually on the increase, however, this cannot be compared to that of larger enterprises, this is due to certain challenges and weaknesses peculiar to SMEs (Bosua, Evans and Sawyers, 2013). This study thus tries to investigate the use of social media by SMEs as well as challenges faced by SMEs while adopting social media. The study builds on several pieces of conceptual literature concerning the adoption of social media, social media in crises and adoption of social media in Ireland. Furthermore, the study adopted the qualitative methodology which collects data from the conduct of semi-structured interviews. Five (5) interviews were conducted amongst SMEs owners in Ireland and analysis was made using the thematic process. Amongst the findings of the research, was that social media has been effectively utilised by SMEs in Ireland especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it aided communication, engagement and interaction with customers, it also enhanced business awareness further increasing the number of customers. The research discovered that the use of social media by SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly revolutionised the way business is carried out and subsequently increased sales and profits. The challenges faced by SMEs in social media adoption was prevalent due to existing government regulations on the use of social media for sales of some products during the COVID-19 era and also lack of usage of social media by older populations which limited the extent to which businesses could connect to older clients. The research thus recommends the effective use of social media by businesses especially through constant content creation and posting as social media is the 21st-century vogue of doing business.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research Overview

This study seeks to explore the use of Social Media as a Marketing Strategy – A Case of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the Republic of Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020 to August 2020). The case study enhances the exploration of real-life issues situated within a defined context (Baxter et al. 2008). The general terms, the case study also analyses a defined problem which consists of real and relevant issues by using concrete information and methodology.

In today's globalized world e-commerce is becoming an integral part of modern business (Ahmad, Abu Bakar, Tengku, *et al.*, 2015). The advent of the internet and digital marketing has transformed business marketing from traditional methods to modern methods with social media being a key factor that propelled this change (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014). However, the adoption of social media as a marketing strategy comes with several challenges and hurdles that businesses such as Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) face in their attempts to effectively and successfully adopt social media as a marketing strategy (Janet, 2013; Parvin and Narayan, 2014). This assertion is echoed by a number of empirical studies (Ahmad, Abu Bakar, Tengku, *et al.*, 2015; Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013; Annulus, Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012) all of which agree that social media adoption is harder for SMEs than it is for large established companies/or enterprises. Commonly cited barriers to social media adoption and use by SMEs include: lack of appropriate and adequate knowledge and training regarding the use of and application of social media tools for business, unavailability of technological capacity to enable effective adoption of SM use (Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013).

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of SMEs were closed due to government regulations which included social distancing measures. A large number of SMEs therefore had to adopt social media platforms to keep up with customers' needs and services required. This research explores how SMEs in the Republic Ireland adopted and used social media as a Marketing Strategy in Ireland during the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020 to August

2020). The study also assesses opportunities and challenges to SM adoption and use by the SMEs particularly during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The research is an exploratory case study targeting the Republic of Ireland as a case district. The researcher used purposive sampling to select Five (5) SMEs for the study. The selected participants are owners or senior managers, one from each SME. The semi-structured interview was used to collect information on the participants' views, opinions, ideas, and practices regarding adoption and use of SM during the COVID-19 era and its impact on their businesses (March 2020 to August 2020). These views include processes or strategies for social media adoption, SM tools and platforms, whether industrial sector and size of SME plays a role in adoption, opportunities, and challenges available for SMEs in Ireland, and makes recommendations that can help the effective adoption and use of SM by SMEs in Ireland.

1.2. Research Purpose

The rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has significantly changed the way marketing information is communicated and distributed worldwide. This has transformed the customer from being a passive receiver of information to an active generator of information and influencer of purchasing decisions by fellow consumers (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014; Janette, 2013). Traditional methods of marketing are mainly characterised by unilateral forms of advertisement such as radio, television, print media such as posters, flyers, newsletters and newspapers, billboards, telemarketing, SMS marketing which are all basically *offline* forms of marketing (Verbanov, 2015; Parvin and Narayan, 2014; Narayanan, 2012). These traditional forms are being overtaken or complimented by contemporary marketing methods that depend on *online* and electronic forms of media. Various terms are used to reflect or describe contemporary marketing methods such as e-commerce, social media marketing, e-mail marketing and digital marketing (Narayanan, 2012).

Social media has become the vogue of internet marketing due to its ease, flexibility, and expansive reach. The adoption of social media as a business strategy has been vehemently recommended by past studies (Narayanan, 2012; Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013; Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni, 2019). The purpose of this dissertation thus is to explore the benefits of using social media as a business or marketing strategy amongst SMEs in Ireland with reference to the COVID-19 era. The COVID-19 pandemic brought along its attendant

consequences as it forced many traditional businesses to close down as a result of low patronage and bankruptcy (OECD, 2020). The switch to the use of Social media to keep up with customer needs and services was a landmark action, the benefits of this switch are yet to be explored by existing studies. This study thus seeks to discuss the role of social media as a marketing strategy for SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic thus providing research in the gap in the existing literature and contributing to existing knowledge on the topic.

1.3. Republic of Ireland

According to Statista (2019), there were a total of 263, 338 SMEs in the Republic of Ireland in 2018(242,501 Micro, 17,752 Small and 3,085 Medium Sized) as the figure below shows which indicates that about 92% of SMEs in Ireland are micro (employ 10 people or less).

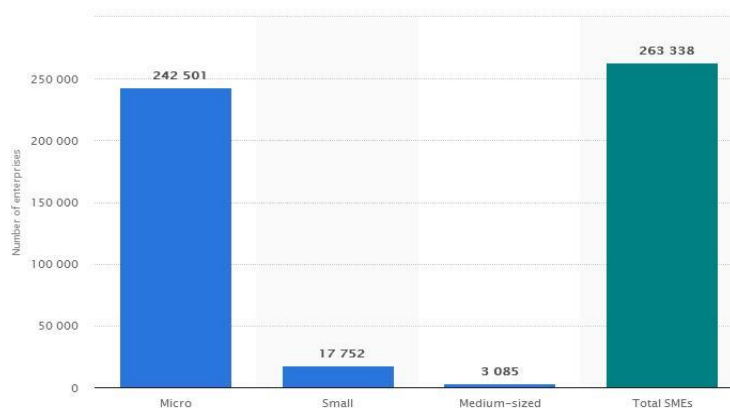


Figure 1. SMEs in Ireland (Source; Statista, 2019)

The need for most of these businesses is to grow and sustain employment. A key area of government policy for SME in Ireland is focused on encouraging SMEs to involve themselves in innovation, collaboration and, increasing their opportunity for internationalisation and increasing their chance to go digital (OECD, 2019). The report indicates that Irish SMEs are lagging in terms of digitalisation due to lack of awareness of the available opportunities and their benefits. OECD (2019) indicates that compared to other European countries adoption and use of digital technology in Ireland is rather average although social media use in business is above average. The table below outlines how small business (those having between 10 = 49 employees) performed in terms of indicators related to the adoption of ICT in 2017.

Category	Percentage (%) of Small Business that adopted
Use of Social Media for Business	65.25 %
Use of Computers	55.63 %
Having a Website	70.88 %
Use Customer Relations Management	29.2 %
Use Radio Frequency Identification	8.55 %

Table 1. SMEs Social Media Performance Indicator Source: OECD (2019)

There is, however, a lack of empirical studies on Social Media adoption and SMEs in Ireland especially during the COVID-19 era. The most notable research on social media in Ireland such as Harrigan and Ramsey (2011) and Mellet and O'Brien (2014), were conducted before BREXIT and do not adequately address specific issues regarding Social Media adoption. Again, with the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in government policy regarding SMEs have stimulated certain salient factors regarding the use of social media to come to fore. This exploratory research is thus timely and important to as it sought to learn from the SMEs on issues relating to the adoption and the use of SM by examining the benefits, opportunities, and challenges of using social media as a marketing strategy, especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

1.4. Research Questions

Based on the research purpose above, the following are the research questions.

- i. What are the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs in Ireland?
- ii. What are the benefits of using social media for business by SMEs in Ireland?
- iii. What challenges do SMEs in Ireland face in adopting and using SM as a marketing strategy?
- iv. In what ways do SMEs in Ireland use social media for business during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5. Research Objectives

The use of social media by businesses has been termed as a worthwhile endeavour, as social media tools when efficiently used significantly increases online presence, enhances the effectiveness of business promotion, successfully enables online marketing and creates a positive environment where marketers and customers meet (Narayanan, 2012). The rise in social media usage has seen a shift in the way business is carried out, the use of the internet has brought a new experience to marketing, advertising, branding and promotions (Bosua, Evans and Sawyer; 2013). The unprecedented rise in social media as a means of

communication between business owners and customers has thus been appreciated and researched on by many scholars (Ahmad, Abu Bakar, Tengku, *et al.*, 2015; Bosua, Evans and Sawyers, 2013; Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012). The findings of these researches have proven that social media has made consumers more accessible and have provided a new set of communication tools which makes marketing faster, reliable and easier for doing business.

Despite the above, there is a significant gap in the literature as very few studies exist that discuss the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the recent nature of the event, especially in Ireland. The pandemic served as a catalyst that influenced new ways of doing business through the use of social media, however, few academic sources exist that can authenticate these claims. Based on this, the dissertation seeks to investigate the use of social media as a marketing strategy by focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic era. This serves as the major difference between this study and previous studies.

The objectives of this study are thus.

- i. To discover the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs in Ireland
- ii. To critically investigate the benefits of using social media for business by SMEs in Ireland
- iii. To examine the challenges SMEs in Ireland face while adopting and using SM as a marketing strategy
- iv. To investigate the ways SMEs in Ireland, use social media for business during the COVID-19 pandemic

1.6. Justification/Significance of the Study

Social media is continually becoming highly influential, and in most cases, unavoidable and an important part of the modern business to the extent that it can be a make or break element for companies to maintain their reputation and continue to succeed in the modern business era of the internet. Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni (2019), described how the power of SM can significantly affect the reputation of an organization or a firm. The authors provide an example of a case with United Airlines which lost (in just a day) 800 million in market value due to a video posted on SM by a couple of passengers who filmed three (3) airline security guards dragging a passenger against his wish from an overbooked plane. The story quickly circulated on various social media platforms and was picked up by various news outlets and other passengers. Negative and angry comments ensued with more people sharing their negative experiences with the airline, which led to the airline

offering an apology and coming up with costly policies to avoid losing their reputation further as well as customers. This story demonstrates how quickly, and significant social media can be used to change the fortunes of a business.

Understanding different ways through which SME use social media as a marketing strategy can help inform businesses on how to approach social media adoption and use, and how to effectively integrate SM in their respective business (Alford and Page, 2015). That is the core purpose of this study as the research sought to discover how effectively social media was used by businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Following to this, there is the need to explore the various opportunities provided by SM as a marketing tool bearing in mind that some SMEs are still not knowledgeable of what prospects SM has for their businesses and its benefits (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014).

The justification of this research is thus hinged on the intention to empirically discover what various SMEs know about SM, its benefits and how it has been effectively used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the focus is given on understanding the different barriers to social media adoption and use, as Omoyza and Agwu (2016), noted that the hysteria of social media has made researchers forget that there is a flip side to everything. Evidence from empirical studies show that different SME types- have different kinds of goals in terms of SM use (Ming, 2020), and also face different kinds of challenges due to a variety of factors such:

- The size of the firm,
- Resource capacity (human, financial),
- The sector of the business
- Internal and external factors.

Thus, this research investigates the adoption of social media by selected SMEs in Ireland to explore if the challenges they face in relation to the use of social media are similar or not, further drawing conclusions on these challenges and how they can be effectively resolved. Furthermore, the research comes up with recommendations for future research activities that would inform SMEs on the best way forward towards effectively adopting social media as a marketing tool for their businesses.

1.7. Outline of the Study

In studying the impact of social media on SMEs in Ireland with reference to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research is subdivided into five major chapters

- Chapter one provides the introductory chapter which discusses the importance of social media on SMEs, social media is seen as a landmark achievement in the 21st century which has made online businesses and transactions easier, thus this chapter discussed the relevance of social media and integrated it to the current study. The chapter further discussed the purpose of the research, research questions, objectives, and justification.
- Chapter two is the literature review which provides a critical analysis and critique of secondary literature concerning the research topic and objectives. The essence of this is to investigate the extent which past researchers have researched on the study objectives and identify grey areas which can be filled in the current study.
- Chapter three contains the research methodology which gives the procedural framework for achieving the objectives of this research. The research methodology covers basic philosophical and procedural frameworks for data collection and analysis.
- Chapter four contains the presentation and analysis of data, by which the findings are discussed under various themes and collaborated with secondary research sources. This chapter also links the findings of the study with the research objectives.
- Chapter five is the concluding chapter and it provides the implications of the findings on the research questions, recommendations, conclusions, and reflections.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Overview

This chapter is a critical assessment of various empirical studies including theories, models, frameworks and research findings related to the role that social media marketing plays for SMEs. The chapter also focused on identifying gaps in the existing literature and also demonstrates how the literature studied addresses the research questions for this study. To establish how SMEs are using SM during the pandemic, it is important to address the following areas: what social media means including in the context of this study; what SMEs are, and what boundary in terms of size of SME will this study use, what challenges do SMEs face including barriers to social media adoption and use that puts them at a disadvantage compared to large enterprises as well as challenges brought about by COVID 19; what drives SMEs to adopt and use Social Media as a marketing tool and what benefits do they derive from using Social Media for business by SMEs.

2.2 Social Media Definitions and Its Implications on The Study

Although there is a galore of literature on social media in the academic circles, more writers overlook the need to provide a definition of what social media is, which leaves readers guessing or not fully grasping what actually is social media (Andzulis Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012; Bhanot, 2012). It is important for this study to have a working understanding of what social media means to enable readers to understand the background information and definitions of SM and how they apply to this study.

The working understanding of Social Media for this study is that, unlike other forms of offline media, Social Media are internet-based applications (Bhanot, 2012) that allow people to interact socially and generate, publish and exchange information and network in an active, two-way or multiple ways (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) without necessarily having the host or the initiator of that information being actively involved (Perez Trigueros-Preciado and Popa, 2017). This dynamic has brought business and consumers closer and made the consumer more active and influential to business outcomes through user-generated content as opposed to traditional offline forms of media (radio, television, newspapers, poster) where the consumer is passive and the communication is generally one-way from business to consumer (Scuotto Del Giudice, and Obi Omeihe, 2017;

Bhanot, 2012). The other most important aspect of social media is that it is inexpensive, is widely accessible, which makes it a must for SMEs to adopt and use in today's business world (Zahoor and Qureshi, 2017; Varbanov, 2015).

The use of social media tools and platforms has changed over the years from being merely for socialization and social communication purposes to becoming important for business as well (Zahoor and Qureshi, 2017). Figure 2 shows the findings of Bhanot (2012) on how social media helped companies acquired customers in India where he found that Social Media helped small, medium and large companies to successfully acquire customers in proportions of **35%**, **40%** and **25%** respectively:

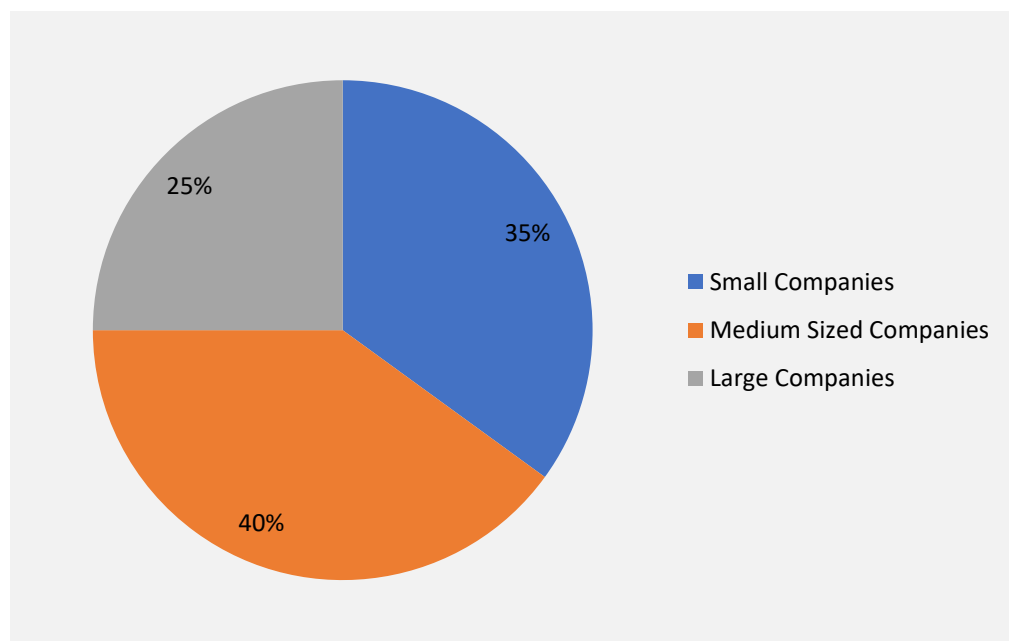


Figure 2. Use of Social Media by Companies to reach their customers (Source: Bhanot, 2012)

It is reported that 84% of internet users have accounts on Social Networks spending around two to four hours a day on the internet (Varbanov, 2015). Furthermore, a single user is said to have an average of 195 friends, a majority of whom use social networks to communicate, find and share information about products and other services (ibid). According to OECD (2019), over 65 % of small business enterprises in Ireland use Social Media for business.

2.3 Understanding SMES and Definition Implications

This study will use the EU's definition of an SME. According to the European Union's defining, an SME is based on 2 key factors namely: staff headcount and either turnover or balance sheet total (EC Website, 2020). In terms of staff headcount, a micro-enterprise has less than 10 employees. A small enterprise has less than 50 employees. A medium enterprise has less than 250 employees. Any business employing 250 people or over is categorized as a large enterprise. The table below is a breakdown EU's definitions of an SME based on EU's criteria:

Thresholds (Article 2)			
Enterprise category	Headcount: annual work unit (AWU)	Annual turnover	Annual balance sheet total
Medium-sized	< 250	≤ EUR 50 million	≤ EUR 43 million
Small	< 50	≤ EUR 10 million	≤ EUR 10 million
Micro	< 10	≤ EUR 2 million	≤ EUR 2 million

Figure 3. EU's Definition of SMEs (Source: European Commission Website, 2020).

The challenge with definitions for an SME is that it varies from region to region and country to country, which brings about the question of generalization of research findings carried out in localized settings, a country, or a region. For example, A study conducted in Australia by Bosua, Evans and Sawyer (2013), businesses with a staff headcount of 1-4 were classified as small which is in contrast to EU's definition that such business is a micro-enterprise. Again, a business with a staff headcount of 20 – 199 was categorized as a medium (see table below):

Participant/Interviewee	Business Type	Classification a Small or Medium Enterprise (No, of Employees)
P1 Owner/Manager	Cleaning	Small (5-19)
P2 Owner/Manager	Accommodation	Small (5-19)
P4 Owner/Manager	Cleaning	Small (1-4)
P5 Manager	Finance	Small (1-4)
P9 Manager	Stevedoring	Medium (20-199)
P10 Manager	Accommodation	Medium (20-199)

Table 2. SME case organisations, key business type and SME sizes Source: Bosua, Evans and Sawyer (2013)

Basing on this observation it can be noted that the definition of SMEs by headcount as per EU's definition is not applicable worldwide. The other dilemma regarding different criteria for definition concerns the difficulty in classifying some businesses as small, medium, or large. For instance, a business may have between 10 - 49 staff headcount but its turnover is not more than 10 million Euros, does one categorize that as a Small Firm (basing on its turnover) or a Medium Firm (basing on its staff headcount)?

Some distinctive features of SMEs from large organizations are that their organizational structures tend to be less formal and centralized (with owner/managers making almost all decisions), management practices are often informal, they focus on survival other than growth, have limited staff capacity and most are resource-constrained in terms of funding, infrastructure, research and development, customer base, trained personnel and others (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014; Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013).

In terms of the boundary of the size of the SMEs, this study will target Micro and Small enterprises basing on the EU's staff headcount definition (i.e. less than 10 and less than 50 members of staff, respectively. 99% of enterprises in Ireland and UK are small and micro (EU, 2020; Mc Geever, McQuinn and Myers 2020) and they are the ones that are worst hit during times of crisis (OECD, 2020)

2.4. Barriers/ Challenges to SME Adaption and Use

The nature of challenges that SMEs are confronted with to remain competitive is the main reason why Social Media Marketing has been positively promoted as a significant element towards making SMEs overcome most of these barriers and not only remain competitive but also increase their revenue and brand image (Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013; Fosso Wamba and Carter, 2014; Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014)

There are three distinct areas that have been widely identified as putting the SMEs at a disadvantage compared to large organizations: organizational characteristics including size and resources; manager characteristics (especially in relation to attitude and behaviour); as well as geographical characteristics considering that most SMEs are localized and operating within a limited geographical space (Fosso Wamba and Carter, 2014; Scuotto, Del Giudice and Obi, 2016).

Unlike large organizations, SMEs are generally smaller in size, have limited resources, are localized, have limited partners and a majority of them are still trying to survive with limited promotional activities (Calli and Clark, 2015). For example, only 65 % and 75 % of Irish SMEs were able to use Social Media for business and had a website respectively in 2017 (OECD, 2019). Evidence from several studies demonstrates that SMEs are confronted with both internal and external barriers to SM adoption. Internally, SMEs face such constraints as poor management (not or inadequately trained, resistant to new technology and change); inadequate financial resources to fund the purchase of computers, and hire qualified IT staff; IT challenges; unskilled staff; and lack of training in social media (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014).

External factors may include lack of awareness and lack of access to appropriate technology for SM by partners, customers, and other stakeholders; government policies that limit access to some social media platforms and tools (Verbano and Venturini, 2013). Adam, Jizat and Noor (2016), noted that advancement in ICT including e-commerce and social media is moving at a far much faster rate than the level of technological development and knowhow by SMEs. As a result, in times of such a crisis like the Covid-19, SMEs, especially, Micro and Small enterprises, are more unlikely to survive because their level of resilience to such crisis is far much lower than larger enterprises (OECD,

2020). The study will, therefore, explore how Irish SMEs (especially, those that are Micro and Small) are using SMM during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2.5. Analysis Challenges Brought About by COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact On SMEs

The Coronavirus (COVID 19) pandemic is the biggest public health crisis in recent times. The unprecedented economic impact of COVID 19 is still yet to be fully known, although it is now almost a certainty basing on forecasts that the World is heading towards a global recession (Bartik, Bertrand and Cullen, 2020; OECD, 2020). The pandemic has led to a sharp and sudden decline in production and consumption and has been a major cause of large-scale human death and suffering globally. Covid-19 has not only significantly impacted on businesses but on consumers as well. It is noted that while on one hand business output has fallen by about a fifth globally, consumer expenditure has also declined by about a third on the other hand following the shutdowns that have been implemented by governments in different countries (OECD, 2020)

However, compared to large enterprises, SMEs seems to be the worst affected by the effects of the pandemic (Bartik, Bertrand and Cullen, 2020; McGeever, McQuinn and Myers, 2020; OECD, 2020). For example, as a result of the negative response by the stock markets Worldwide due to low confidence and uncertainty, the effects on SMEs is far much greater than on larger enterprises because of their vulnerability and financial instability (Mc Cann and Myres, 2020; McGeever, McQuinn and Myers, 2020). Again, due to a significant halt in supply and demand, most SMEs are on the brink of running out of business while some have already gone bankrupt (OECD, 2020). For instance, according to OECD (2020), as of May 2020, 37% of UK firms considered and some already made redundancies while 41% of the firms had shut down temporarily, with 35% of them expressing fear that they would never open again.

The Central Bank of Ireland estimated that SMEs in non- agricultural sector in Ireland would need about 2.4 to 5.7 Billion Euros to remain in Business if their businesses were to be halted for 3 months (McGeever, McQuinn and Myers, 2020). However although the government of Ireland and other governments have put in place business rescue packages and measures such as the provision of grants, loan schemes, debt repayment breaks, and others, it is argued that most of these measures will not suffice considering the overall impact of the pandemic on businesses (OECD, 2020).

2.6 Social Media in a Crisis

Effective and efficient communication during a crisis is very important between the business and its stakeholders including customers because it helps the customers to keep in a touch of the business position and crucial updates during the crisis but also to get feedback from the customers of the issue (Derania and Naidua, 2015; OECD,2020)

A study by Derania and Naidua (2015), sought to understand how different types of social media are used to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis. This qualitative study used case studies of different industries worldwide including that of British Petroleum. They noted that social media can be a very important tool during a crisis in helping organizations and companies disseminate vital information to enlighten people of the crisis, prevent the tarnishing of company's image through misinformation of the public as well as prevent the situation from getting worse.

Social media can be very useful for direct and indirect communication of information by businesses during a crisis and can help them retain their customers as well as manage responses from stakeholders (Derania and Naidua, 2015). Different SM tools play different communication roles during a crisis and the lack of research in this area has led to most companies not trusting SM as an effective communication tool during a crisis. Social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter can help disseminate the information faster as opposed to traditional forms of media and can help reach out to as many people as possible quickly and also provide a forum for immediate response/ feedback to customers and stakeholders (Derania and Naidua, 2015; Durkin, McGowan, and McKeown, 2014).

2.7. Drivers of Social Media Adoption and Use by SMEs

A lot of theoretic and empirical studies have looked into key factors that determine or drive the intention by SMEs to adopt technology and this debate has drawn various schools of thought not only in the business and management discipline but from other disciplines as well such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, social science where such models as behaviour change models, theories of technology adoption and diffusion, the open system theory, and marketing theories have all been consulted to explain drivers of SM adoption in Business including SMEs (Adam, Jizat, and Noor, 2016; Ahmad, Abdul, Tengku et al, 2015; Alford and Page, 2015; Bosua, Evans and Sawyer, 2013).

Adam, Jigzat and Noor (2016), analyzed factors that drive the intention to use e-commerce and social media (s-commerce) by SMEs in Malaysia. Among the drivers of social media use, they highlighted: attitude (positive attitude towards social media use); self-efficacy (which is the belief in one's ability to use e-commerce and social media); performance expectancy (that it will improve the performance of the business); effort expectancy (how easy it will be to use it); social influence (influence from the use by others) and facilitating conditions (the business and infrastructure support). The illustration below provides an illustrative framework of drivers of intent to use social media:

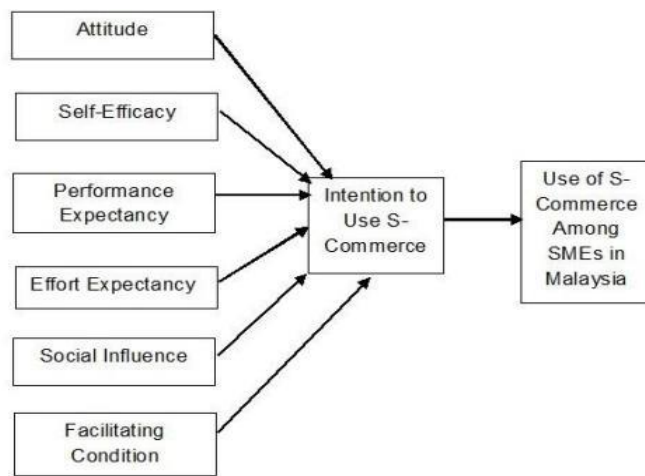


Figure 4. Drivers of social media usage (Source: Adam, Jigzat and Noor, 2016)

On the other hand, Fosso Wamba and Carter (2014) reviewed various studies and learnt that such factors as firm innovativeness and size, age, gender and education level of managers and owners, firm's geographical location and firm's industry sector were all reported to play a role in driving the firm's intention to adopt and use Social Media tools for business (Fosso Wamba and Carter, 2014). However, their own survey of 453 SME managers across selected countries, found that manager's gender, education and firms geographical location were not significantly correlated to driving the decision to adopt SM while the rest (firm innovativeness, size, age of the manager and industry sector) were significantly correlated to driving the firm's intention to adopt SMM (ibid)

2.8. The Process of Adoption and Use of Social Media to The Business

Adopting and using social media as a business strategy especially for new business and SMEs is not an easy as easy a process as it may appear. A lot of work commitment, research, planning and filling relevant staff positions and training needs, investing in ICT and others need to be done (Alford and Page, 2015). Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp (2012), provides an illustrative framework for the process of adopting SM into a business as a sales strategy as follows:



Figure 5. Process Evolution of Social Media in Sales (Source: Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012)

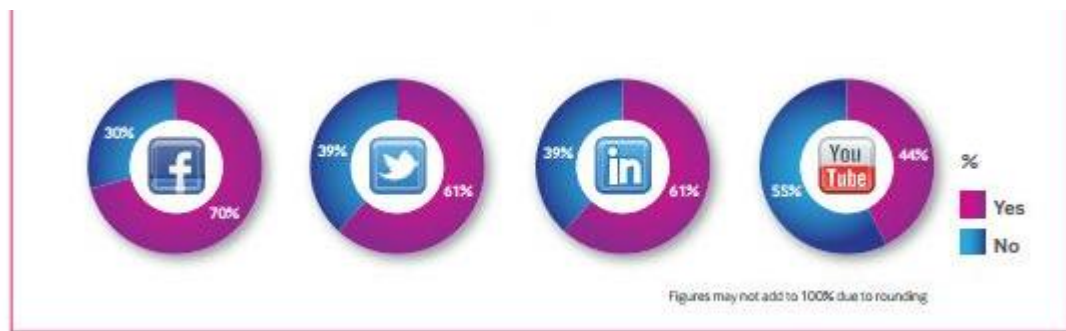
This illustration indicates that adoption of social media use is generally done in phases from establishing media presence in phase one, to active efforts to increase traffic to business social media pages, to transforming social media as sells channels and then fully integration SM as a sales strategy in phases two, three and four respectively (Andzulis, Panagopoulos and Rapp, 2012). It must therefore be emphasized that SM and its adoption processes are dynamic and changing all the time, such that while this study explores the use of SMM by SMEs during the pandemic, the findings may also depend on the stage or phase at which the particular firm is in terms of its SM adoption process as well as the effect of COVID– 19 on the selected firms

2.9 Social Media Adoption in Ireland

The shortage of empirical studies that address the issue of Social Media Adoption and Use in Ireland has been highlighted in a number of studies (Keenan, 2014) which is part of the reason this study has been conducted to contribute towards filling this gap. It is reported that up to 90% of people aged between 19 and 24 use social networks in Ireland including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (Irish Times, 2020). It is also reported that 60% of the

adult population in Ireland uses Social Media Networks which is slightly over the European average of 56% (Eurostat, 2020).

A study by Financial Broker (2014), noted that 70% of Irish businesses used Facebook, 61 % used twitter, 61% LinkedIn and 44% use YouTube for their business (Financial Broker, 2014) as highlighted in the figure below.



(Figure 6. Use of Social Media Sites by Irish Businesses, Source: Financial Broker (2014))

Again it is reported that in terms of use of internet 89% of Irish internet users read news online, 53% say the Internet helps them make purchasing decisions, 97% shop online and 88% research online and buy offline (Financial Broker, 2014) as the figure below demonstrates which shows that Ireland is a favourable place for businesses to adopt and use social media (Financial Broker, 2014)

89% of Irish Internet users read news online (EU 91%)	53% of all Irish Internet users state the Internet helps them choose better products / services (EU 51%)	97% of all Irish Internet users shop online (EU 87%)	88% of all Irish Internet users research online and purchase offline (EU 79%)
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Source Independent.ie / Mediascope

Figure 7. Uses of Social Media in Ireland (Source: Financial Broker, 2014)

Durkin, McGowan and McKeown (2013), conducted a 2-year in-depth action research study spanning between from 2009 to 2011, targeting 8 Irish SMEs' owners and Managers as key decision-makers. The study sought to come up with a theoretical model for understanding effective SM adoption and use by SMEs. The study found that although

approaches for the adoption of SM by SMEs varied from business to business, the owners and managers across the SMEs under study were more motivated by the fear of losing out on what was deemed as an essential and new innovation, other than the actual desire to derive real value from adopting and using SMM including in terms of a customer's experience (Durkin, McGowan and McKeown, 2013). A similar action research study by Keenan (2015) which targeted 6 dairy SMEs in Ireland to understand challenges and opportunities SMEs in Ireland face in adopting using SMM, found out that all the 6 SMEs used SM for business and had been aware of its benefits (Durkin, McGowan and McKeown, 2013; Keenan, 2015).

There is a general consensus on the studies conducted in Ireland and around the world that SMM adoption by SMEs is affecting a shift from the use of traditional media (newspapers, TV and others) to modern online methods including SM which are deemed more cost-effective and vital in customer engagement, acquisition and retention (Keenan, 2015). However, contrary to the findings by Fosso, Wamba and Carter (2014), who noted that there is no significant correlation between gender and education of the owners and Managers in influencing their decision to adopt social media, Keenan (2015), found out that gender and education were significantly correlated to Managers' or owners' decisions in SMM adoption and use. For example, Keegan (2015), observed that male managers were more influenced by instrumentality hence more likely to adopt innovations while as female managers/owners were more socially calibrated hence less likely to adopt SMM. However, it must be noted that the sample of 6 SMEs is small hence the need for a larger sample to provide more insight into these findings (Keenan, 2015). However, it has been also noted that in Ireland, the age of the manager/owner is also significantly correlated to the manager's decisions to adopt social media with younger managers more likely to adopt new technologies than older managers which were also echoed by other studies including Fosso, Wamba and Carter (2014).

Support by the Irish government to SMEs even during the COVID-19 pandemic is available through grants and loans and well as information support (OECD, 2020) and such organizations as Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta who besides allowing SMEs to sell their products online on their platforms for free are also offering grants to their clients for accessing consultancy services in different areas (OECD, 2020)

2.10. How Social Media Benefits SMEs

Businesses today are spending more time on social media sites to evaluate how their customers are responding to their brands. Consumers online are contributing to shaping brand image as well as promoting or discouraging brand purchasing intentions (Candi, Roberts, Barczak, 2018; Witzig, Spencer and Galvin, 2012). Furthermore, they help advance brand popularity and customer acquisition (Alam and Khan, 2019; Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014). To acquire all this information and use it to the benefit of the business, the right knowledge, a clear social strategy, and the right resources need to be available. Candi, Roberts, Barczak (2018), recognize the role social media can play in opening innovations for the often resource-constrained SMEs to gain significant competitive advantage through social media leveraging. Their findings reveal that SMEs that have a clear social strategy and mobilize resources and commit towards implementing the strategies by connecting with customers through SM, gain significant benefits in terms of customer involvement/engagement. This finding is reiterated by Bosua, Evans and Sawyer (2013), who realize the role that SM plays in helping SMEs gain significant knowledge to help sustain their firms. A majority of SMEs source and share knowledge through getting involved in Social Networks and Social Media plays a significant role in facilitating this process of knowledge acquisition and sharing. It broadens the spectrum of communication and interaction between the SMEs and partners as well as consumers without the SMEs suffering a lot in terms of cost. However, SMEs lack systematic methods of collecting and analyzing data based on consumers posts or user-generated content (Etter, 2019; Kupfer, 2018).

SM tools are providing more than just social interface amongst their users at little or no cost (Kadam and Ayarekah, 2014). Companies take advantage of using such social media tools as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn, Google + and others to advertise their brands and offerings, and to make sells and gain more customers without any significant cost implications (Alford and Page, 2015). For example, Witzig, Spencer and Galvin (2012), found of that over 80 % of large companies, small business, and nonprofit firms used LinkedIn as a business tool with small firms scoring the highest over the other two in terms of displaying the company logo on LinkedIn (21.3%) and their CEOs' use of LinkedIn (74 %). This underscores the point that since LinkedIn is a free social media tool for businesses, SMEs may take advantage of its inexpensive nature to promote themselves. However, according to the OECD (2019), Irish SMEs (about 90 %

of which are Micro SME) were still faced with hurdles with Social Media and ICT adoption due to awareness and resource capacity (human and equipment) issues, which indicates that being inexpensive alone does not solve all SMEs problems in adopting SM, other factors need to be considered in a holistic manner (OECD, 2018) in order to effectively adopt and use social media.

2.11. Social Media Marketing

Tuten and Mintu (2018: p1), define “Social Media Marketing (SMM) as the utilization of social media technologies, channels and software to create, communicate, deliver, and exchange offerings that have value for an organization and its stakeholders”. Social Media Marketing is enabled by the digital infrastructure of the Web as well as the availability of a variety of web-based or online Social Media tools like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter just to mention but a few which are available on a host of smart devices including mobile phones, tablets, laptops and others (Janett, 2013; Ming – Yi Wu, 2020; Tuten and Mintu, 2018). Rebecca (2017), emphasize the important feature of Social Media Marketing that it enhances and fortifies a two-way interaction or communication pattern between the business and its stakeholders highlighting that consumers already have the inclination to connect with the products and the normal and natural way that people communicate is mainly two – way or in the form of a network pattern. MEU100477690

It is Social Media Marketing’s ability to improve the quality of the relationship between the business and its consumers that contribute to a trickling down effect of a variety of positive benefits which include customer engagement and retention (Alves, Fernandes, and Raposo; 2016). Theoretically, therefore, the central motivation for use of SMM in business is its ability to foster and augment engagement through the use of social media tools, although it has to be mentioned that SMM is not only restricted to social media tools and platforms. It also includes identifying the target audience, defining, and executing a strategy or strategies for SMM, creating managing and monitoring SMM content, and monitoring its impact (Narayanan, 2012; Rebecca, 2017). For SMEs, the challenge is their lack of technological capacity and inadequate resources to effectively and regularly undertake these tasks which could be a determining factor in deciding whether to use SMM as a business strategy for a majority of SMEs (Alford and Page, 2015; Varbanov, 2015)

2.12. The Conceptual Framework

The literature has demonstrated that SMEs, including those in Ireland, are confronted with several barriers and challenges which can be categorized into five macro-categories namely: management, IT, Finance, Staff, and Environmental (Calli and Clark, 2015; Fosso Wamba and Carter, 2014). The COVID pandemic is part of the environmental barriers but has also compounded other barriers like staff retention, financial barriers, management barriers (Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen; 2020; Chen, 2020; OECD, 2020). Studies have demonstrated that these barriers/challenges drive the SMEs intention to use social media marketing to maintain a competitive advantage as well as for customer engagement and retention (Candi, Roberts, Barczak, 2018; Kupfer, 2018; Witzig, Spencer and Galvin 2012).

Based on the above, the conceptual framework will explain the variables of the study and the units of measurement i.e how the researcher intends to collect data to answer questions posed in this dissertation. The below therefore discusses the variables their units of measurement.

2.13. Variables

In terms of independent and dependent variables, the study has two main variables (figure 8) which contribute to the conceptual framework. An independent variable is one that is being manipulated in a study while as a dependent variable is one which can change or changes depending on how the independent variable is being manipulated (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). As such, SM adoption and use are an independent variable and SMEs business success is the dependent variable because it changes based on how social media is being used. The basic theoretical assumption for this study is that: the more SMEs adopt and use social media including during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the more the positive impact on the SMEs. (Srinivasan, Bajaj and Bhanot, 2016).

Independent Variables Variable

- SME adoption and use of SMM, including during Covid – 19

Dependent

- SME Business Success in Ireland including during Covid- 19

Figure 8. Variables

The conceptual framework for this study has been constructed taking into account the relationship between the variables and based on the literature reviewed especially influenced by such studies as, Calli and Clark (2015); Srinivasan, Bajaj and Bhanot (2016), just to mention but a few. SMEs adopt SMM to overcome the barriers and challenges that they face including those brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic and hence expect to derive a number of benefits from the use of social media for business also including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

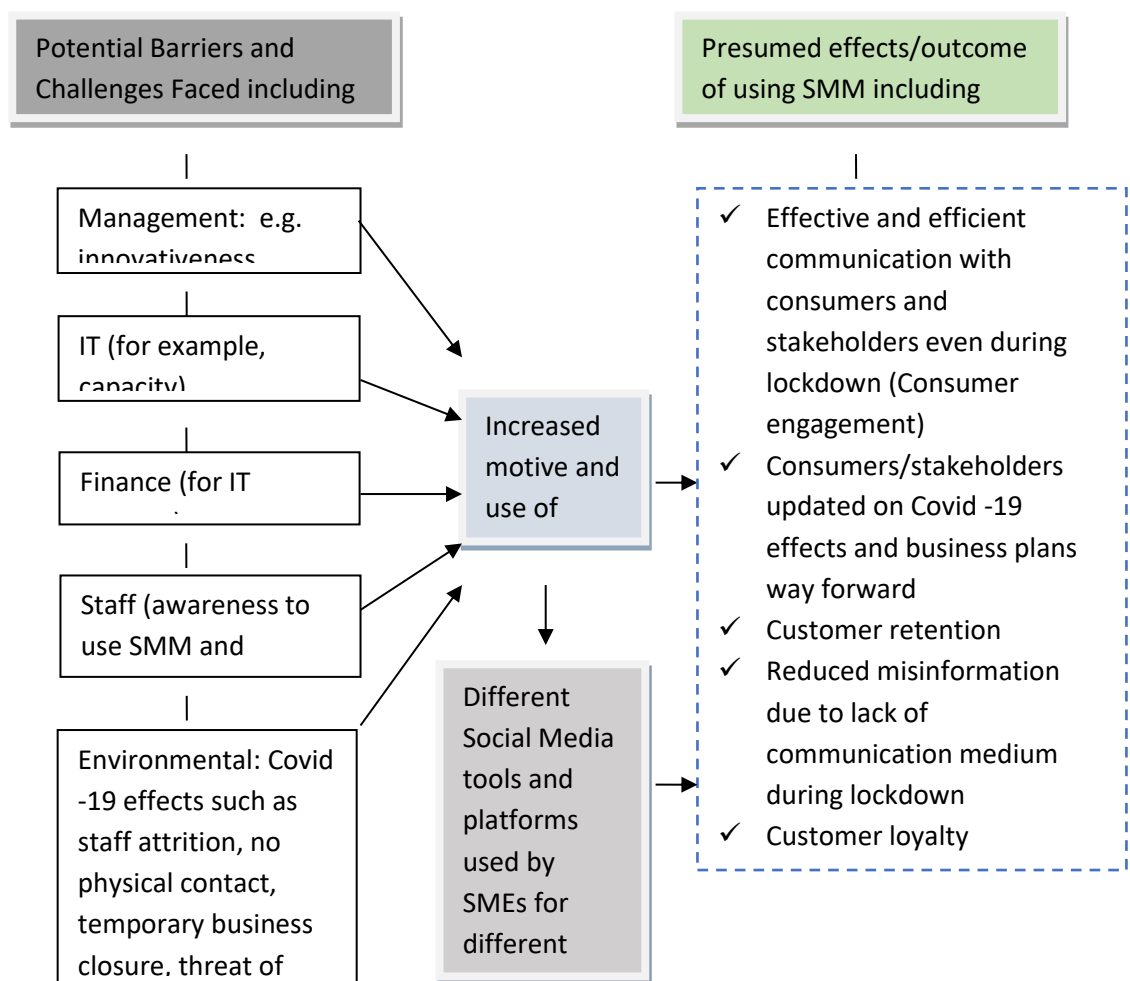


Figure 9. Conceptual Framework for the exploration use by SMEs in Ireland during the Covid-19 Pandemic including barriers and benefits of the use

2.14. Conclusion

This section focused on reviewing relevant literature related to the study highlighting evidence from previous studies on the issue of the use of social media by SMEs. The section has covered issues relating to the challenges and barriers that SMEs are confronted with including those related to adoption and use of SM as a marketing tool and those associated with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. It has also gone further to review literature related to drivers of adoption and use of SM as a marketing strategy which is a critical element in determining SMM use by SMEs. With the evident lack of empirical research on the use of SMM by SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, this exploratory study is, therefore, important to help fill this gap. The next chapter will explain the methods that will be used to collect and analyse information on the study.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design, to explain and justify the methodology and the methods that this study is going to employ to effectively achieve its objectives and respond to the key research questions. The study's methodological framework is based on the Research Onion (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016), the figure below is an illustrative outline of how the different layers of the research onion have been applied to this study:

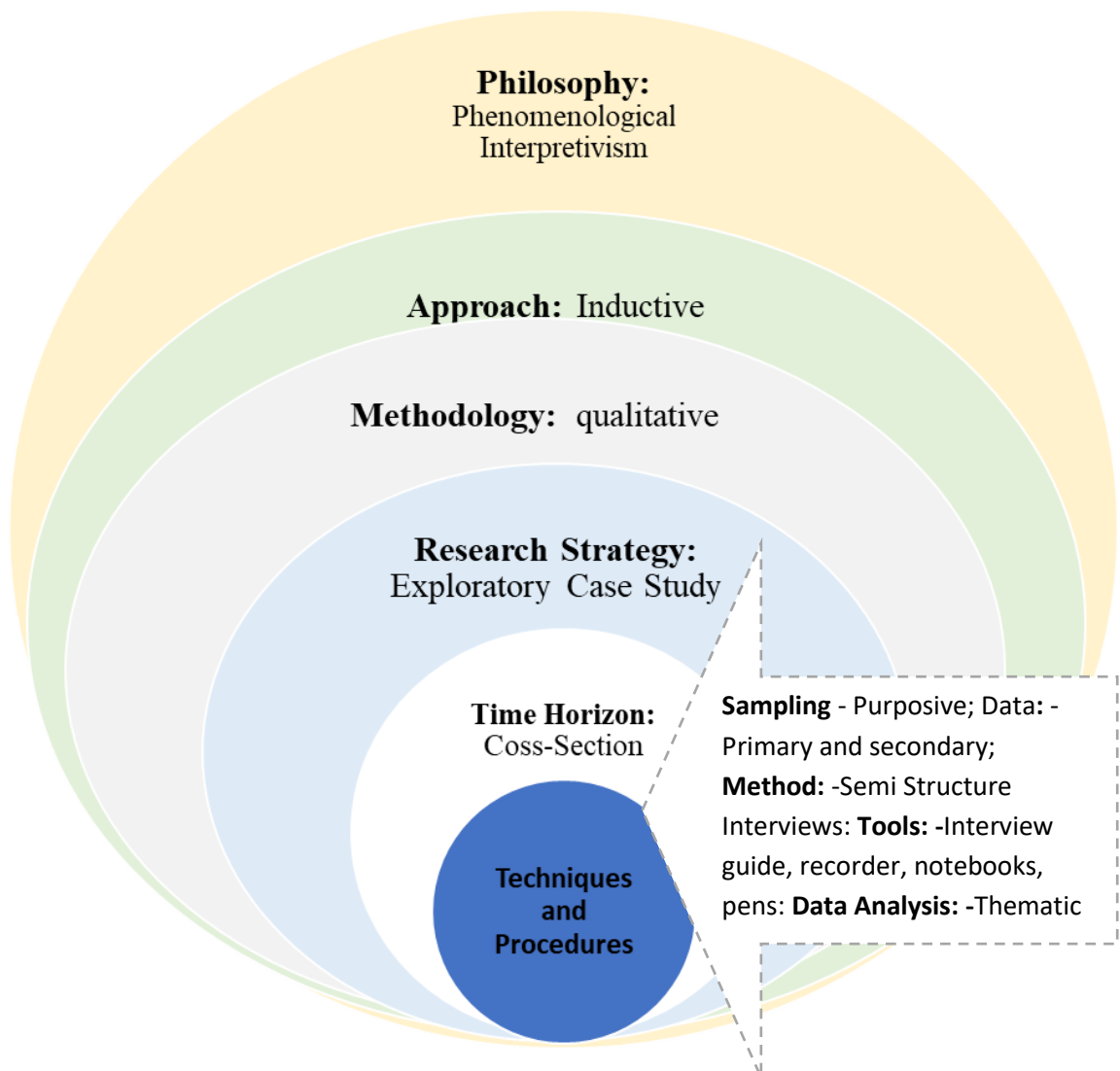


Figure 10. Study's Research Framework based on the Research Onion (Source. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016)

Several factors came into play in selecting the best design and methodology for this study: Firstly, the underlying philosophical beliefs and inspirations of the researcher who harbours subjectivist epistemological, ontological, and axiological values and beliefs. As a result, the research adopts a qualitative methodological approach with an aim to gather peoples' views, opinions and ideas relating to the use of SMM by SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, the contribution made by previous empirical studies on the methods they used, theoretical models and frameworks they came up with, the variable they employed, and how they measured them and their recommendations (Fosso, Wamba and Carter, 2014; Keenan, 2015) have contributed to informing the research design and methods of data collection, tools, techniques and procedures employed in this study. The literature also helped to the development of the conceptual framework for this study which contributed to the choice of methods to be used for this study. Finally, the aim and objectives of this study, the timeframe within which the study needs to be conducted and the lack of financial resources available for the study determined the most suited and effective sampling methods and sample size, and data collection techniques to be used.

For the overall methodology, this dissertation is qualitative research, according to Mcmillan and Schumacher (1993, p 479) qualitative research is defined as primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns (relations) among categories. The qualitative research is a less structured research methodology used to gain in-depth information about people's underlying reasoning and motivations. The end goal is to develop a deep understanding of a topic, issue, or problem from an individual perspective.

3.2. Research Philosophy

Considering the variety of research philosophies that are available, it is always a challenging task selecting the best and appropriate research philosophy for a study (Saunders, 2012; Groenwald, 2004).

This study adopts the phenomenological interpretivism research philosophy which reflects the underlying values, principles and beliefs of the researcher that she and the subject for the research including the participants are not removed from the phenomena being studied, and that the researcher believes that the information that she is seeking for the study is constructed and contained in the views, lived experiences, ideas and knowledge of the participants (Saunders, 2012; Groenwald, 2004). Therefore, to best gather the information, the researcher used methods that will allow her to interact and build rapport with the

participants and enable them to express their views, opinions, sentiments and knowledge regarding the phenomenon being explored which in this case is to explore the use of SMM by SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. As research has shown the COVID-19 pandemic has been devastating to businesses more especially SMEs (OECD, 2020) and it was important to hear from and interact with the business owners/ Senior Managers themselves and get the information from them as regards the challenges they were facing and how they were overcoming them, including whether social media marketing was playing a role during the pandemic.

3.3. Research Approach

The research approach involves a set of plans and procedures that provide the basic steps to data collection, analysis, and interpretations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016), the research approach generally flows from the type of research questions posed. For this study will be the inductive approach. As noted earlier the overall research method chosen is the qualitative studies, qualitative studies go hand in hand with the inductive approach this is because both methods seek to study the context and setting of participants and further understand social constructs based on the individual perspective (Collins and Hussey, 2013). The inductive approach also seeks to create links between variables and study those links as they apply to human relations and interactions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Using the as a justification, the inductive approach is used in this study to investigate the links between Social Media and business operations of SMEs during the COVID-19 era, thereby understanding the variables from the individual's perspective.

3.4. Research Strategy

The critical question in any research related to strategy is what strategy was used for the research and, what is the justification for using that research strategy over others?

This study is an exploratory case study. Although case studies can use multiple primary data collection methods (Saunders, 2016) the challenge comes with analysis and synthesis of all the data due to the sheer volume and a variety way of analysis. A mono data collection method will make data analysis less complicated and allow for a deeper focus on issues being investigated (Saunders, 2016). The case focuses on a selection of 6 SMEs in Ireland. The lack of empirical studies on Social Media by business in Ireland, especially use of SMM during COVID 19 has inspired the researcher to focus on Ireland and also particularly how SMM is being used by SMEs during the COVID– 19 Pandemic.

3.5. Research Timeframe

The timeframe adopted in this study is the cross-sectional timeframe which studies variables and its interaction with human beings within a specific period (Saunders, 2012). The cross-sectional research uses different samples however data is collected from these samples within a specific period. Using the cross-sectional timeframe, the researcher was able to collect data from different SMEs and make an analysis of their responses within the stipulated timeframe i.e. from May to August 2020, which was the height of the COVID-19 in Ireland.

3.6. Method of Data collection

3.6.1. Primary data

Data was collected through primary and secondary sources. Considering the overall qualitative nature of the study, the researcher used the non-probability purposive (judgement) sampling to select participants who were involved in semi-structured interviews (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016; Collins and Hussey, 2013). According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016), purposive sampling is where the researcher uses their own knowledge of the field to select relevant participants and the research does not consider another participant who may come along in due course (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016; Collins and Hussey, 2013). Using a purposive sample allows the researcher to sample cases that will best provide answers to the research questions to realize the aims of the study bearing in mind that time is limited as well the lack of funding (Saunders, 2012)

The researcher selected a total of 5 SMEs key decision makers (owners, CEOs, or Senior Managers), one from each SME. The criteria for selecting a business as an SME is based on the European Union's definition (EC, 2020) based on staff headcount. The justification for selecting participants in Senior Positions is because they are the ones who make the key decisions in their SMEs and the interview questions can best be answered by them.

The challenge with judgement sampling is whether the findings can be considered representative since the number of participants is usually small (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016). However, with purposive studies, the question of generalization is not necessarily as important as in a positivist quantitative study although Saunders argues that generalization of purposive samples can be generalized in that they give a logical profile that can still be considered representative because the purpose is to understand what is happening in each case in order to make logical generalizations

3.6.2. Semi-structured interviews and Justification

This being a phenomenological interpretivist study, the researcher focused on collecting and understanding the views, opinions, ideas, beliefs and conceptions of the participants regarding the adoption and use of Social Media Marketing as a Marketing Strategy for their businesses, especially during COVID -19 pandemic. The aim is for the participant to be allowed the chance to explain themselves and express their views through open-ended questions (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016). Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used. This type of data collection method allowed the researcher to create rapport with participants and probe on issues being discussed providing an opportunity to collect deeper and information which may not necessarily be possible in a self-administered survey questionnaire scenario (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Additionally, a semi-structured interview is suitable for scenarios where variables are difficult to collect statistically (Saunders, 2012), for example, people's recommendations on the best ways to implement Social Media Marketing in SMEs.

3.6.3. Secondary Data

Besides the primary data, the study also collected secondary data. The methodological approach to this study involves the understanding of the situation to understand the concepts, theories and models around social media and SMEs in Business and explore the empirical studies in order to identify gaps and place the study in the general body of knowledge in business marketing (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016), As such secondary data from various sources such as books, journal articles, company websites, other business reports and government statistics form part of this study. Secondary data has been critical to enlightening the researcher on various debates, definitions, methodologies, previous and current approaches relating to digital Marketing and SMEs.

3.6.4. Research Questions

The following are the research questions based on the objectives of the research that formed part of the guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews. Below is a list of questions based on the objectives of the study.

RO1- To understand the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on SMEs

- i. Has your business been affected by the COVID - 19 pandemic? If Yes how, if no why?
- ii. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way you do business? If Yes how, if no why?
- iii. Do you face challenges as an SME compared to large enterprises?

- iv. If yes in the above, how do these challenges affect your business? If no, how do you cope with competitions from large enterprises?
- v. Do you feel there are lessons you can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic concerning how business can be managed? If yes how, if no why?

RO2- To explore the benefits of using SM for business by SMEs

- i. In your understanding, what is social media?
- ii. Do you use social media for your business?
- iii. What social media tools do you use for business?
- iv. What are some of the benefits of using social media for business?

RO3- To explore challenges faced by SMEs in adopting and using SM as a marketing strategy

- 1. How has your business been affected using SM as a marketing strategy?
- 2. Do you face challenges while using SM as a marketing strategy? If Yes how, if no why?

RO4- To establish how SMEs are using SM for business during the pandemic

- i. Is SM useful for you during the Covid-19 Pandemic?
- ii. How do you use SM during the pandemic and what are its benefits?
- iii. How did a change in using Social Media tools affect your business during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- iv. Do you feel there are recommendations which can be adopted to make the use of SM more effective for SMEs?

3.7. Research Ethics

The research ethics are a key part of the research and the researcher was guided by the Griffiths College ethics guidelines and requirements, the researcher's subjectivist axiological assumptions, and the nature of the study being interpretivist.

The researcher ensured that she fulfilled all ethical requirements throughout the process of the research to adhere to expected ethical standards. The illustration below shows the

key areas that the researcher considered throughout the research (Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill, 2016)



Figure 11. Key Ethical areas during the research

In terms of consent, the researcher notified the participants of their selection to participate in the study and provided them with background information to the study by explaining the aim of the study, the objectives, and how long the interviews will take. It was also emphasized that the study is being done for academic reasons as part of the fulfilment of a master's study. The participants were also made aware that there were no financial rewards for participating in the research as it is not funded. However, the researcher noted that she will be able to share information (if asked to) about Social Media and SMEs that can be beneficial to the participants based on the knowledge she has gained through her study. The participants were also given enough time before the interview, and consent was also sought regarding any notetaking and recording of the information (See Appendix B for the informed consent form). Participants also had the choice not to respond to any question

they did not feel like responding to and had the right to withdraw from the research at any time if they felt like.

The researcher was also respectful while conducting the interviews. issues of confidentiality played a minor role as participants consented that the researcher could make public their names and that of their organisation, hence this is displaced in table 3.

Finally, the researcher ensured that she or the research did not in any way compromise the rights of the participants as such all required ethical clearance forms were filled and consent was sought from the participant to conduct the research.

3.8. Method of Data Analysis

After the data was collected, it was transcribed as word files, coded and analysed using thematic analysis (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016) based on objectives of the study and emerging themes from the findings. The researcher transcribed the data by copying down the interview that had been recorded word by word in order not to miss any information. The qualitative data coding was done to categorise the data and group them together according to their similarity in order to establish patterns, themes and trends (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016) so that the researcher could merge-common themes from the transcripts which were vital in data organization, cleaning and interpretations (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016).

3.9. Limitation to the Methodology

The study was limited by several factors. The lack of funding for the research had some effect on the sampling whereby the research had to select a few SME cases (5) as well as use judgement and convenient sampling methods which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2016) are most suitable for types of research that are financially constrained. Judgement and convenient sampling were widely used in qualitative research to select subjects to best respond to the research questions and meet the objectives of the study (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2016). Critics of purposive and convenience sampling often cite increased researcher's bias as one of the key weakness of the method raising the issue of research credibility (Collins and Hussey, 2013). However, Creswell (2003), argues that a clear description of the criteria and its justification is one way of helping to reduce the bias.

The study is also limited in terms of the timeframe to conduct the research and complete the study. As seen for a number of studies conducted on the impact of Social Media adoption and use by SMEs in Ireland and other countries, a number of studies (Durkin, McGowan, and McKeown, 2013; Keenan (2015), have use methods that allow the researchers to collect the data for a relatively long time. For example, both Durkin, McGowan, and McKeown, (2013) and Keenan (2015), used action research design conducted for a period of two years which allowed them time to interact with the participants for a longer period of time. Since the timeframe for this study is limited to a few months such methods, are inapplicable. The researcher, therefore, recommends the use of such methods in the future to observe the impact of COVID-19 in a longer-term and how SMM plays a role.

The above limitations however did not affect the credibility and authenticity of this study, as the researcher ensured that all empirical processes were adhered to in the collection and analysis of data.

3.10. Conclusion

This chapter focused on explaining the research design and methodology including research strategy, methods for sampling, data collection, and data analysis as well as the research question and ethical considerations for the study. These methods were based on varying pieces of literature and studies conducted by previous research, this was to ensure that the research is conducted in a process that ensured the findings are logical and reasonable. The next chapter will focus on presenting the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Overview

This section of the research provides the analysis of data and discussion of findings based on the interviews conducted. Interviews were conducted with Five (5) participants across different SMEs in Ireland, the biodata of the participants are documented in the table below

Name	Nationality	Name of Business	Industry
Camilla Mashaun (CM)	Nigerian	Freeborn noble hair	Hair Salon
Aoife Smyth (AS)	Irish	Escalate	Digital Marketing
Kate Hanley (KH)	Irish	Galvan properties	Real Estate
Kareem Mostafa (KM)	Egyptian	Tribetactics	Digital Marketing
Blaine Doyle (BD)	Irish	GlowDx	Pharmaceutical

Table 3. Participants Bio-Data

This section is subdivided into three, the first is the analysis of findings, which all responses analysed under a theme and are presented in tables. The themes were generated via coding of different responses on the adoption of Social Media (SM).

The second section is the discussion which relates the findings to the literature review and other available secondary sources. The final section relates the discussions to the objectives of the study.

4.2. Analysis of Findings

4.2.1. Finding one: The Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs

This finding was derived from interview questions 1-5

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
CM	The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on my business are both positive and negative. Since I run hairdressing salon, a lot of my clients had to visit the shop to get services rendered, however, due to the lockdown and restrictions on movement customers could no longer visit my saloon, however, the positive impact was that I had to adapt to using social media and decided to send my hair products to customers and do zoom classes to teach customers how to properly wear wigs. With social media was less stress in handling customers and employees, as I could use online platforms to reach many clients and communicate with other employees
AS	COVID-19 pandemic was a total game-changer for my business, as we were focused mainly on the hospitality industry (restaurants to be precise) however with the lockdown, we had to re-strategies and restructure our business to get other clients which had turned out positive as our business had experienced growth in customer base and profits. The process of doing business was also improved as I was working from home and could still communicate perfectly with other employees and clients. Social media had turned my business for the best
KH	The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic aided me in how I do business and operate with clients, due to the pandemic I had to figure out ways to increase customer services and maintain and retain clients. The COVID-19 led to a series of innovations and platforms on how to effectively connect with clients and keep sales afloat.
KM	The COVID-19 pandemic turned out in my favour, since my business deals with creating videos and online content, the COVID-19 pandemic drove a lot of businesses using traditional means of advertising to seek greater online presence thus increasing the demand for my business services. The COVID-19 did not change practically how I did business; however, it significantly increased the number of clients, demands, and profits of the business. I still maintain an online business however I had to increase my budget in terms of cost and meeting up to needs of clients
BD	The COVID-19 significantly changed the way we did business, as it made us switch from testing on sexual health-related matters to the testing of COVID-19, this led to astronomical growth in profits, sales had increased significantly reaching 100%. If we had stayed in the same line of business, we would have been bankrupt. The COVID-19 pandemic increased our sphere and influence of business as formerly we operated from a business to customer (B2C) base, however, currently, we operate from business to business base (B2B), with most clients being large companies in the oil and gas industry, pharmaceutical company and football clubs.

Table 4. Participant Opinions on the effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Business

4.2.2. Discussion of Finding one

From the above it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive impact on the SMEs interviewed, this is contrary to what scholars had discussed in the literature review (section 2.5). According to researchers like Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen et al (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic had resulted in a fall of overall business output due to a decline in customer expenditure and shutdowns implemented by the government. McGeever, McQuinn, Myers (2020), reported that SMEs were the worst hit of COVID-19, as they were vulnerable, financially unstable and had fewer clients from the start. A cut in demand for their products and services was bound to have a negative effect on profits and operations resulting in bankruptcy and temporal shutdown.

From the finding of this study, the COVID-19 pandemic had significantly benefitted SMEs as they were able to increase customer base, change targeted customers, improve the method of business operations, and get more profits. This is collaborated by Musa and Hope (2020) and Ganaie, Zafar and Seth (2020), who explained that the COVID 19 pandemic had served as a business boost for many companies who already had a vibrant online presence. The switch of doing business manually to a more internet-focused operation resonated positively with the existing trend thus enhancing business sales and profits. Aifuwa, Saidu and Aifuwa (2020), on the other hand, noted that only businesses who were able to switch from traditional mediums of operating business to online did benefit from the COVID-19 pandemic. The switch from traditional to online mode is thus a cardinal factor that influenced the growth and expansion of SMEs during the COVID-19 era.

In a separate explanation, Ganaie, Zafar and Seth (2020), made a distinction between businesses which were not negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and those who were, according to them, businesses that felt the impact of COVID-19 were product-based businesses that dealt with the conversion of raw materials into finished goods, since there was a restriction on movement, and, a limit on close contacts of individuals, it was difficult for manufacturing exercise to be conducted. Most factories were closed and employees who carried out most of the production exercise were forced to stay at home, this limited the availability of products for sale, thus leading to a loss on product-based businesses. Ganaie, Zafar and Seth (2020), further explained that service-based businesses that dealt

with the provision of not exclusively intangible goods did not feel the negative impact of COVID-19 pandemic as they could easily switch from traditional to online services. Service-based businesses could also operate without physically meeting the client, this made adopting an “online service business strategy” easy for service-based industries. However, production businesses could not have an “online production business strategy”. Service-based industries could also easily teach clients online on how to use several services or send commodities to clients via DHL. This is evidential as CM and BD adopted this approach “*in teaching clients online how to wear wigs and self-test themselves for COVID 19*”. Other services used online platforms to sell content to people like AS, KM, and KH. Service-based industries did not need to have physical contact with clients and customers; hence the COVID-19 pandemic was more like a catalyst to the adoption of modern ways of doing business.

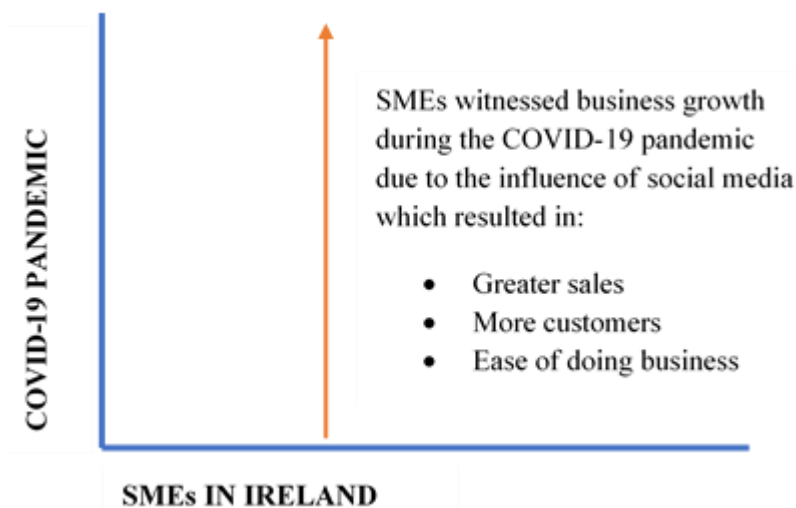


Figure 12. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs in Ireland

4.2.3. Finding two- Benefits of using Social Media for business

This was discovered from interview questions 6,7,8 and 9

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
CM	Social media is a selling point for modern businesses, with businesses making the most of it and using it to connect faster with clients across different countries of the world. Businesses were also using it as a marketing tool to promote business awareness and brand quality. Social media is fascinating as lots of quality content can be put on it to enhance brand awareness and get reviews which when prospective clients see they could easily root better for her business. My favourite social media platforms were Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The benefits of using social media for my business had reduced the stress of conventional marketing, increased the number of people whom I offered

	services to and provided me with flexible hours as I am a nursing mother.
AS	Social media was a way of connecting to customers, creating awareness, growing brand loyalty, and customer base. Social media can be used to achieve different goals especially in showcasing quality information to clients and hoping clients relate positively to that information. Social media has been beneficial to my business as it has increased online sales by over 200% and it keeps getting better. Social media is an easy, faster, and a more flexible medium of doing business. It eases the way of meeting clients further improving profits at less cost. My most preferred social media platforms were Facebook, Instagram, and Google ads.
KH	Social media is an online platform where people connect for business inclined purposes, it is essential in meeting clients indirectly (not face to face) but getting good rewards and returns from it. Social media is a significant means of reaching a large and variety of customers. I do not particularly have much to say about social media usage, since our business had only recently started to utilise the strengths of social media for marketing and selling of property, however, one advantage of using social media as I am able to use visual and walkthrough videos to show clients the property they intend to buy. This was very useful and successful
KM	social media was more than an online business tool, social media was a platform for placing the right information that makes people know about the business and wants to patronise it. The benefits of using social media for business is in its ability to meet a larger range of audience, ease of use and further, the low cost associated with operating social media platforms, my business utilised several social media platforms including Facebook, Hotspot, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.
BD	social media is a world-renowned digital marketing tool, I am confident about social media as in the nearest future, marketing is going to mean digital marketing. Social media is a robust platform that enhances the use of content to draw people to his products, make them get tested for COVID-19. My most used social media platforms were Facebook, LinkedIn, Google ads, and Instagram.

Table 5. Participant Opinions about Benefits of using Social Media during the COVID-19 pandemic

From the above data, it is evident that the use of social media is beneficial for SMEs in Ireland. This is because the majority of the participants gave positive comments concerning the use of social media.

4.2.4. Discussion of Finding Two

From the above section, it is apparent that social media is indeed a potent instrument for business success amongst SMEs in Ireland, this is because of its multiple usages that can deliver fast, and bulky messages across a large number of people. This is collaborated by the findings of the literature review where Candi, Roberts and Barczak (2018), notes that social media aids SMEs through opening up channels for innovations and gaining significant competitive advantage through social media leveraging, he further revealed that with the use of social media, SMEs can effectively connect to customers, thus gaining significant benefits in terms of customer involvement and engagement. In the same vein Bosua, Evans, and Sawyer (2013) noted that with social media, SMEs can gain significant knowledge on how to sustain their firms, especially in terms of customer management. Both Candi, Roberts and Barczak (2018) and Bosua, Evans and Sawyer (2013), postulations are correct as the participants of the interview especially CM and KM noted *“that the use of social media had enhanced their connections and engagement to customers”*, CM also noted, *“that through online polls I was able to discover what her target audience needs and satisfy them adequately”*. Furthermore, Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni (2019), explained that social media could deliver the right information to the right audience, therefore, facilitating the process of knowledge acquisition and sharing. It broadens the spectrum of communication and interaction between the SMEs and partners as well as consumers without the SMEs suffering a lot in terms of cost.

Another benefit of using social media gained by SMEs was the flexibility, the ease of access and its interactive frameworks which made it easy to use. Business owners were not confined to their service space or country but could adopt social media to boost market awareness and service provision in other countries (Durkin, McGowan and McKeown, 2013). This was evidential as BD notes his *“company is an Ireland based company, however, operates in Mexico and gained lots of profit”*, also CM and AS noted that they *“could sit in the comfort of their homes and offer services to people around the world”*. This is in line with Musa and Hope (2020), who stated that social media could open newer markets to business, so they provide international services.

The adoption of social media has a wide range, most of the participants noted that they used Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Instagram to actively engage their clients, create awareness of their brands and market services online. This supports the discussion in the literature review made by Alford and Page (2015) and Witzig, Spencer, and Galvin (2012), who noted that amongst the most used social media tools were Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Shakaut (2020), further gave the reason for this as the social media platforms provided a visual display of content that allowed customers to see what they need, read reviews, and compare with other products. These platforms also support the sharing of posts, ads, and #tagging etc. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are amongst the most popular patronised social media by businesses, Facebook in 2019 recorded having over 60 million active business pages and over 2 billion people can be reached via Facebook (Statista, 2020). Instagram has over 25 million business profiles and 2 million monthly business advertisers, in 2019 Instagram recorded generating \$20 billion in ad revenue (Statista, 2020). In Ireland, a study by Financial Broker (2014) noted that 70% of Irish businesses used Facebook, 61 % used twitter, 61% LinkedIn, and 44% use YouTube for their business. The findings of the interviews noted that the Financial Broker analysis is correct as several SMEs in Ireland use Facebook.

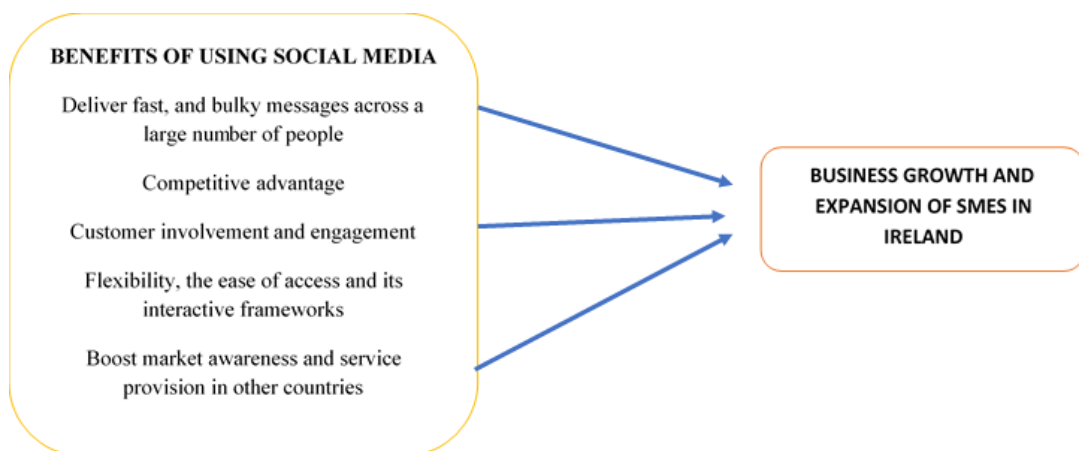


Figure 13. Benefits of Using Social Media on Business Growth and Expansion of SMEs in Ireland

4.2.5. Finding Three: Challenges faced by SMEs in Adopting and Using SM as a Marketing Strategy

This finding was obtained from the responses to question 10 and 11 on the interview schedule.

From the analysis of interviews, challenges faced by SMEs in using social media were not negative effects but challenges that drove growth and progress of the business.

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES
CM	The challenge in using social media was the constant need to create content that is “catchy” to the client’s eye, I am challenged to keep creating better products, knowing how to attract the right audience, understanding their likes, and influencing their purchase patterns. This thus had affected my business greatly as there is a constant drive to progress, enhance visibility on social media platforms, and provide credible and authentic services for clients. With increased visibility on my social media platforms, it was very easy for customers to locate me and order for services. It is interesting that my business had to be genuine and attractive as possible because, with social media, clients are confident and could make bad reviews about businesses when services did not meet up to their expectations.
KM	The major challenge of using social media for business was how to get a return on investment (ROI), as creating contents online, posting videos, having ads were financially demanding, hence how businesses could get back the profits they invest in social media was the major challenge he faced. However, there was less difficulty in achieving ROI as social media is the main way businesses are communicating with customers, and since there were many customers purchasing things online, it was easy to get ROI. Businesses that did not know how to communicate effectively with social media were bound to experience heavy challenges.
AS	There were no negative challenges while using social media as businesses could practically do whatever they wanted on social media platforms. Social media too is a platform where people get to showcase various business-related information, using the best way to pass information across to clients was thus a major positive achievement of the use of social media. My business adopts several social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to reach diverse clients which have proven beneficial to my business growth.
KH	The major challenge experienced using social media was its inability to connect with older people who are not inclined to using social media for business. Most social media users are millennials.
BD	The challenge I experienced while using social media was peculiar to my kind of business as Facebook prevented our business from advertising with the perception that we might benefit tremendously after using the platform to advertise COVID-19 self-test products, apart from this social media was indeed a medium of promoting business through digital marketing endeavours.

Table 6. Participants Opinions concerning challenges faced by SMEs in Adopting and Using SM as a Marketing Strategy

4.2.6. Discussions on Findings Three

From the responses above, there is a stark contrast with what was recorded from the literature review, from the works of Fosso, Wamba, and Carter (2014), and Scuotto, Del Giudice, and Obi Omeihe (2014), it was discovered that SMEs experienced challenges in using social media based on their disadvantages when compared to a larger organisation; these disadvantages include organisational size, resources, manager characteristic, and geographical limitations. Building on this Adam, Jizat and Noor (2016), explained that SMEs are smaller in size, have limited resources, limited partners, and many of them are still trying to survive with limited promotional activities. The OECD (2019), pointed out that only 65% and 75% of Irish firms were able to utilise social media for businesses. Kadam and Ayarekah (2014), Witzig, Spencer, and Galvin, (2012), further explained that SMEs suffer from both internal and external challenges which hinder their effectiveness in using social media. Internal constraints such as poor management (not or inadequately trained, resistant to new technology and change); inadequate financial resources to fund the purchase of computers, hire qualified IT staff; and lack of training in social media) hindered SMEs adoption of social media. External, factors such as lack of awareness and lack of access to appropriate technology for SM by partners, customers, and other stakeholders; government policies that limit access to some social media platforms and tools were amongst the challenges facing SMEs (Scuotto, Del Giudice and Obi Omeihe 2016; Verbano and Venturini, 2013).

Using the internal and external challenges above to juxtapose findings from the research, it can be said the SMEs do not have internal challenges in relation to social media adoption, as setting up social media accounts were relatively cheap, easy to use and maintain, hence the argument of internal challenges as lack of financial resources, qualified IT sites etc cannot be sustained. In an attempt to further clarify this, William and Demosthenes (2010), made a difference between setting up a website and using social media platform, he noted that while the former was more cost-intensive due to its elaborate setup and designing interactive features that increased traffic, the latter was easier to set up and cost-effective. Thus, they noted that the challenges faced by SMEs were in setting up and managing a website and not a social media platform.

The major challenges in adopting social media as discovered by the research are mainly external, factors such as lack of awareness amongst the older people (generation X born between 1965-1985) and external government policy. According to Helal, Ozuem, and Lancaster (2018), generation X individuals had a low perception and awareness of social media as they were born during the period of shifting societal values where physical work was celebrated. It became a tradition for people to work in a formal institution or within the four corners of a building. Hence, adopting new mediums of social media that destroys their previous work attitudes is very unlikely with this generation.

Furthermore, governmental policy that banned the ads of some commodities on social media was also recorded as a challenge of using social media. BD noted that “*I was blocked from making ads on self-COVID 19 testing’s on Facebook*”, the reason for the ban was that businesses who advertised COVID-19 kits and other health-related materials influenced people to buy these materials in excess leading to a shortage of materials for those who genuinely needed them (Lyons, 2020).

The challenges of using social media for SMEs are thus external to the business and not internal.

4.2.7. Finding Four: How SMEs are Using SM for Business During the Pandemic

From the previous section, it is evident that social media has been beneficial to SMEs in Ireland. The elaborate usage of social media has made it a significant meeting point for businesses and clients, social media usage is so robust that Helal, Ozuem and Lancaster (2018:p5), called it an “online market” which significantly enhances trade, and sharing of services on a cross border basis. The usage of social media during the COVID 19 pandemic has thus been elaborately explained across all participant

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSE
CM	During the pandemic, I used social media to gain more audience and show more products online. Through Word of Mouth (WOM), bookings, posting of contents, designing feedback assessments and reviews, I have been able to keep up with social trends and provide more services for my clients online. I also use social media for customer engagement by studying marketing trends and providing clients with what is the latest on the market. Also, I used social media to get online students, who are willing to learn hairdressing. Social media has enabled me to adapt to the changing pattern of work as created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

AS	I used social media in this pandemic to re-evaluate and re-strategise my business for better market performance. During the pandemic, the major use of social media was to connect to more clients and grow awareness of for my business through advertisement. Social media also changed the way we did business, as we could work from home, effectively communicate with other staff, and offer services to clients. Social media was also used to build up trust amongst clients, this was an advantage my business had over larger firms, as with SMEs, we could relate better with clients and offer them the exact answers they needed on every question, this was impossible with larger firms.
KH	We did not use social media much during the pandemic, this was because our business was just starting to explore the benefits of using social media. However, social media had been beneficial as it offered our business an easier way of displaying properties to prospective buyers through walkthrough videos. This enabled us to stay in contact with clients through the COVID-19 period
KM	Social media was the contemporary way of communicating, hence my business adopted social media a lot during the pandemic to communicate with clients since the business runs on a B 2 B base, we are able to create educating and entertaining contents for other businesses who used it to communicate properly to their clients. Social media marketing was the modern way of doing business which brought in so many profits for those who were ready for the transition.
BD	social media use during the pandemic was for business promotion, our business used digital marketing processes to sell our services online and further boost profit. Social media was used to reinvent our business from focusing on sexual health testing to COVID-19 testing, we also used social media also increase the scope of our clients. We effectively used social media to enhance the marketing of services though segment marketing, marketing campaigns and creating flexible and personalised online interactions with clients

Table 7. Participants Opinions on How SMEs are using SM for business during the pandemic

4.2.8. Discussions on Findings Four

The findings discovered from the use of social media is in line with discoveries made from the literature review. One of the ways which the participants used social media during the pandemic was to improve and maintain efficient communication pattern between businesses and clients, this goes in line with Derania and Naidua (2015), and Durkin, McGowan and McKeown (2013), who noted that communication during the period of

crises was important for the survival of the business as it enables customers to keep in touch with business positions and receive crucial updates. Communication via social media aided businesses to get feedback from customers, thus, meeting the needs of customers through the crises period. This is exemplified by the participants as CM and AS noted that they “*used social media for the effective engagement of clients*”. Effective customer engagement is essential during a period of crisis as businesses who do not engage their customers were bound to lose them to other competitors, this could lead to low sales and business closure (Musa and Hope, 2020). Social media thus becomes an effective and cheap way of connecting to customers in times of crises. “*Through adopting visual display of items for sales or services*” like BD, CM, and KH or “*through creating educative and entertaining content*” like KM, SMEs in Ireland were able to keep customers effectively engaged during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The use of social media for promotion and creating awareness of business was another positive way SMEs used social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is collaborated by Derania and Naidua (2015), who explained that social media was an important tool in disseminating information and enlightening people on how to get the best out of products. Also Ali (2020), in his study of selling patterns during the COVID-19 pandemic noted that social media was an essential tool used for business promotion before, during and after the lockdown, with restrictions on the movement it was hard for conventional methods of creating awareness to be successful, online platforms were better in terms of scope, ease, flexibility, interaction, and cost. In buttressing this Musa and Hope (2020), explained that during the pandemic social media became the hub of activities with businesses taking due advantage of it to disseminate proper information which boosted sales.

Furthermore, the proper dissemination of information by businesses during the COVID-19 lockdown was key to ensure that they maintained their customers and gained new ones. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram as seen in the preceding section have a lot of users, thus using those platforms aided the fast dissemination of information and also promoted immediate response/feed to customers and stakeholders (Derania and Naidua, 2015; Durkin, McGowan and McKeown).

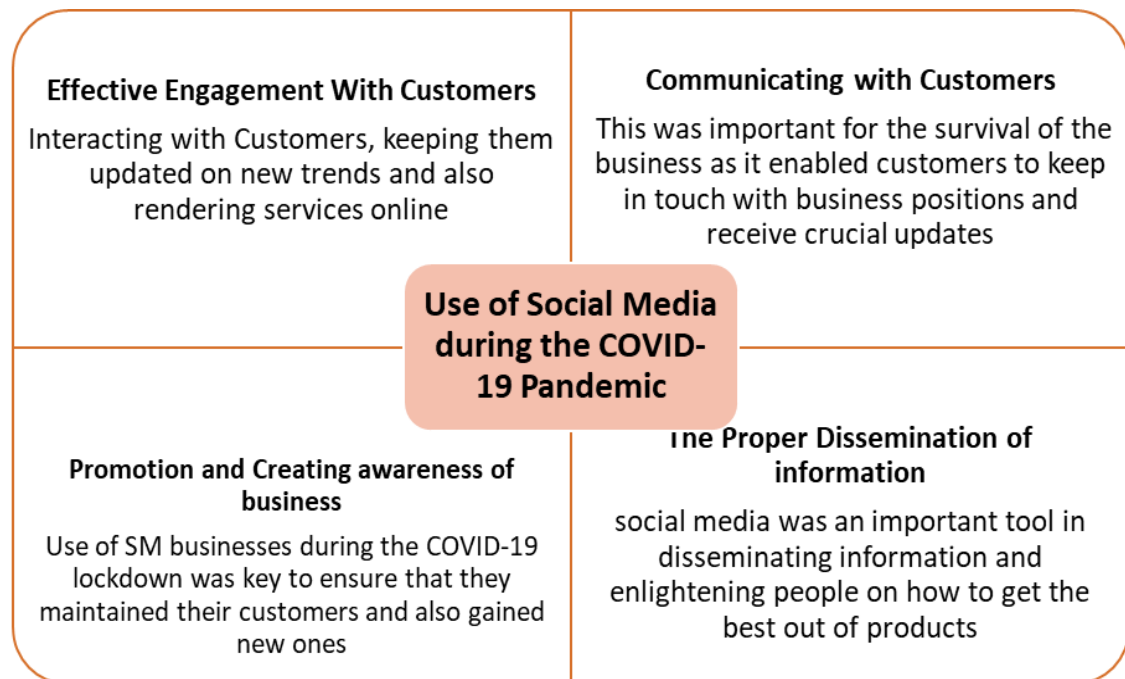


Figure 14. SMEs use of Social Media During the COVID-19 Pandemic

4.3. Achieving the Research Objectives

This research was devoted to the study of social media, which is the vogue in terms of digital marketing in the 21st century. The research attempted to discover the impacts of the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic on SMEs in Ireland. To this end, the research posed four research objectives. This section discusses how these objectives were achieved based on the findings and discussions.

4.3.1. RO 1: To understand the effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on SMEs

This objective was posed to discover if the COVID-19 pandemic affected SMEs in Ireland, as the works of Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen et al (2020), McGeever, McQuinn, Myers (2020) suggested that SMEs suffered the most as a result of the pandemic. Due to restriction of movement during the COVID-19 lockdown, many of SMEs were prevented from experiencing the daily number of clients leading to a plunge in income. From the literature review McGeever, McQuinn and Myers (2020), also noted that the COVID-19 pandemic brought an abrupt hold on activities of SMEs with the majority going bankrupt and being forced to close. This view was, however, contrary to the results of the empirical analysis gotten from the conduct of interviews. From the participants who were owners of SMEs in Ireland, it was revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic did not negatively affect SMEs but positively changed the process in which they did business, hence increasing their profit. It was discovered that COVID-19 enhanced a switch from the traditional method of business operation to the modern online operation, with which social media

played an important role. The COVID 19 pandemic propelled SMEs to re-strategise and re-evaluate their business for better productivity. Amongst all interviews conducted not one of the participants suffered a negative effect of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.3.2. RO 2: To Explore the Benefits of Using SM for Business by SMEs

This objective was posed based on the works of Candi, Roberts, Barczak (2018), Bosua, Evans, and Sawyer (2013) Etter, Ravasi, and Colleoni (2019), who noted that social media served as a formidable tool for SMEs to use in terms of expansion, growth, and success. Etter, Ravasi and Colleoni (2019), further noted that social media was a tangible communication tool which could be used by SM to disseminate information concerning their products to a larger audience, social media also supports ease, flexibility and interactive features which SMEs can use to effectively engage with customers and retain their loyalty. The findings of the research revealed that social media was indeed a formidable instrument for SMEs as participants noted that they had adopted social media to boost their online presence and visibility, thus, attracting more customers and retaining old ones. Social media was also advantageous in aiding business activities on a cross border scale as one of the participants revealed his business is based in Ireland however, it operates in Mexico. Furthermore, social media has been beneficial in engaging customers, meeting up to their needs, listening to their feedback, and seeking better ways to serve them.

4.3.3. RO 3: To explore challenges faced by SMEs in adopting and using SM as a Marketing Strategy

According to Fosso, Wamba, and Carter (2014), and Scuotto, Del Giudice, and Obi Omeihe (2014), SMEs face a lot of challenges in adopting social media, these challenges are; internal (as poor management, inadequate financial resources to fund the purchase of computers, hire qualified IT staff; and lack of training in social media) and external challenges (factors such as lack of awareness and lack of access to appropriate technology for SMEs by partners, customers, and other stakeholders; government policies that limit access to some social media platforms and tools). From the analysis of interviews, it was discovered that SMEs did not face internal challenges as operating social media platforms was not as costly that SMEs could not afford, SMEs were still able to place ads on diverse social media platforms. The challenges discovered that were faced by SMEs were external which had to do with a lack of awareness from older population and governmental regulations which prevents SMEs from using certain social media platforms.

4.3.4. R O 4: To establish how SMEs are using SM for Business During the Pandemic

The use of Social media has become a trend in digital marketing with several SMEs using social media for diverse purposes. This objective was to critically investigate how SMEs adopted social media during the pandemic, it was discovered from the analysis of interviews that social media has mainly been used by SMEs as an effective tool for dissemination of information about products, promotion, advertising and maintaining a relationship with customers. Social media is also used to educate customers on the self-use of products and services and enhance their knowledge concerning other services rendered by businesses.

4.4. Conclusion

This chapter contained the analysis of data and the discussion of findings. The research essential tried to investigate the impacts of social media on SMEs in Ireland, from the analysis and discussions it is evident that social media has been of positive impact on SMEs in Ireland, especially during the pandemic as it enabled them to re-evaluate and re-strategize their business. The next chapter provides the conclusion of the research

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS RESEARCH

5.1. Implications of the Research Findings on the Research Questions

The adoption of social media for business purposes is one of the most celebrated features in the 21st century. The idea of a medium that connects every part of the world and allows people to interact on a cross border scale has spurred the high-level interest in social media. The exponential growth of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram cannot be divorced from the joy social media brings to its users. With over 2 billion individuals connected to social media, it has become a meeting place for business owners and customers. Social media is now the “new marketplace” that is not codified to a single building or is limited by time and space. With social media an individual can sit in the comfort of his home and make online orders and have those orders delivered to his doorstep, this according to Musa and Hope (2020), is a revolution, as social media has revolutionised the process of doing business. The flexibility of social media enhances its usage in both stable and unstable times and adoption by both large companies and SMEs. This study tried to investigate the impacts of social media on SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this study was SMEs in Ireland. To achieve these, four research questions were posed. This section of the study explains the implication of the outcome of research on the research questions.

5.1.1. Research Question One: “what are the effects of COVID-19 Pandemic on SMEs in Ireland?”

This question was posed to empirically investigate the nature and magnitude of the effects of COVID-19 on SMEs, it was discovered from the works of Bartik, Bertrand, Cullen et al (2020), McGeever, McQuinn, Myers (2020) that SMEs were the worst hit during the lockdown. This study, however, discovers differently as the COVID-19 did not negatively impact SMEs in Ireland, it, however, changed the method and process which they operated, the traditional face to face contact or working in a facility was replaced with a less visible but more rewarding online platforms, SMEs switched to offering services through online mediums, this increased the profits, brand awareness and customer base. The implication of this on the research question is that while previous knowledge had recorded that SMEs were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings revealed otherwise.

5.1.2. Research Question Two: “What are the benefits of using social media for business by SMEs?”

This question sort to understand the benefits SMEs gained by using social media. It was discovered that the use of social had completely revolutionised the way SMEs conduct business. With its unlimited feature, social media had opened the world to SMEs to get clients and offer services beyond their country of origin, social media has also significantly added to profits of SMEs as well as increase their customer base. More importantly social media has regulated the stress in running SMEs making work more flexible and interesting. The implication of this outcome buttresses previous research that notes that social media is a significant tool for running a business

5.1.3. Research Question Three; “what challenges did SMEs face in adopting and using SM as a marketing strategy?”

It was previously noted that SMEs faced certain challenges while adopting social media, such challenges exist within the internal and external environment of SMEs. This research discovered that few challenges existed, these were low awareness of social media use by older generations and government regulative policies on social media. However, the basic challenge SMEs experienced while using social media was the need to keep improving and creating content that attracts customers. The implication of this outcome uncovers that social media stirred up the need for growth and development on SMEs as they continued to look for strategies to keep customers engaged online.

5.1.4. Research Question Four: “What are the ways SMEs used social media for business during the pandemic”.

This question unravelled the various ways SMEs utilised social media during the pandemic. Amongst these ways were through brand promotions, advertisement, giving self-care lessons, keeping customers engaged, and increasing sales. The implication of this finding thus reveals that social media had expansive use during the COVID-19 pandemic that includes but not limited to the aforementioned.

5.2. Contributions and Limitations of the Research

Investigations on social media have become relevant in the 21st century as social media has become one of the widely accepted phenomena. Studies that investigate the nature, impacts, challenges and usage of social media are valuable to both academic study and practical use. The wave of social media has hit every major country in the world, an academic analysis that critically investigate issues relating to social media aid in a better

understanding of the phenomena and enhance its usage. This study as an academic inquiry into the world of social media and its impacts on businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed immensely to both the study and practice of social media adoption.

In the sphere of academic knowledge, the study has provided new insights to the phenomena of social media and its use by SMEs, previous knowledge had highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic had severely impacted SMEs to the extent of forcing them to shut down as a result of bankruptcy, this study, however, has discovered otherwise, instead of a negative effect, the COVID-19 had influenced SMEs to re-strategize their business, making it better suited to generate more profits through the use of social media. The COVID-19 pandemic further revolutionised the way SMEs operated, moving them from traditional setups to online means of which social media plays an important role. This study has improved knowledge of the benefit of using social media by SMEs and authenticated previous knowledge that explains the numerous benefits of using social media for marketing and services. Furthermore, the research has discovered that social media is a catalyst for the growth and development of SMEs, as the online market constantly seeks for newer, fresher, and engaging content, hence SMEs need to be progressive in innovations and creativity to keep up with their target audiences.

For practice, the research has unravelled the unending benefits of social media to SMEs, further noting the ways by which SMEs can adopt social media and be more successful at it. SMEs mainly need to understand the workings of social media as it is not just a content placing medium, there is a need to develop the right content for the right audience. Furthermore, the use of social media should be strategic in other words be targeted and precise to achieve goals of SMEs.

The limitations of this study were mainly based on the research philosophy which was interpretivism and phenomenological, this philosophy studies the dynamic nature of humans, thus getting an exact universal pattern of human behaviour is impossible, therefore the results of social media on SMEs in Ireland as discovered from this research may not be the case in a different study area. Furthermore, the interviews only succeeded in getting in-depth from five (5) respondents this is insufficient to get a generalised perspective regarding the effects of social media on SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, an ulterior result may be discovered if a generalised inquiry is conducted.

5.3. Recommendations for Practice

For the proper adoption of social media by SMEs to reap its benefits, SMEs could consider the following based on the research completed:

1. Create the right content for the right audience, the internet is a vast place with several categories of individuals, SMEs need to provide the right content for the right audience so they can effectively attract those whom they intend to attract
2. Social media should be adopted as a marketing strategy to boost sales and awareness of goods and services, this can be achieved by adopting a series of social media marketing plans.
3. There is more to social media than “meets the eye”, SMEs should endeavour to keep abreast with emerging trends and processes which they can integrate to make their social media platforms more engaging.
4. SMEs who are yet to explore the benefits of social media should endeavour to get on board the social media train as digital marketing has come to stay. This research demonstrates that the barriers to entry are low for SMEs with a low investment to access this marketing channel.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research are.

1. A large or broad quantitative study should be carried out to investigate the effects of social media on SMEs during the COVID-19 pandemic, such studies should aim at getting a representative and generalised view through making use of questionnaires and statistical analysis
2. In-depth research should further be conducted on the use of social media as a competitive advantage for SMEs in a crisis, this will provide insights on how social media is effectively used by SMEs to survive in the business place during particularly challenging periods such as pandemics or recessions.
3. Researchers can also explore the benefits of social media on large or multinational firms and make comparisons between larger and SMEs in terms of usage, techniques, and content.

4. Researchers can also revisit the research in six (6) to twelve (12) months to see if the result of this research has changed with the ongoing pandemic

5.5. Final Conclusions and Reflections

In terms of ease, flexibility, cost, and interaction, social media has proven to be proficient for adoption by SMEs especially during the COVID-19 era. Despite the business closures and plunge in market prices and economics, certain SMEs still managed to stay afloat and generate revenue while using social media to connect to customers and keep them engaged. This shows the potency of social media as an instrument for business growth. Social media makes it capable for businesses to reach thousands of people, advertise and promote their goods and services on a large scale. The COVID-19 era has further displayed the potency of social media, as SMEs greatly benefited from the use of social media during the COVID-19 era. The movement of businesses to online mediums due to the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that traditional methods of doing business may not be capable of fully sustaining businesses in the 21st century. It is therefore prudent for businesses to consider the adoption of social media as a marketing strategy to reap its benefits in a fast-changing world.

The research has discovered that contrary to the popular opinion that all SMEs were negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the SMEs interviewed demonstrated that they benefitted from the COVID-19 pandemic as they successfully integrated the use of social media into their businesses. This research thus proves that social media is indeed a beneficial instrument for doing business and SMEs in Ireland should adopt social media platforms in doing business.

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Appendix A: Interview Schedule

Dear participant,

This interview is part of a research project which is a requirement for the award of Masters in International Business Management in Griffith College Dublin. The central purpose of this research is to evaluate the impacts of using Social media by SMEs in Ireland with particular reference to the COVID 19 era. A major intention of the study is to discover how you have utilised social media during the period and the challenges you faced. Requirements of this research will include interviews and audio/video-taping of events for authentication that the research was duly conducted. All Data collected will be protected under legal laws surrounding the conduct of research. Participants safety will be guided under principles of anonymity, identities will only be disclosed if participants agree to it.

Thank you for your anticipated cooperation

Tallisa Vangeldere.

Interview Questions

- i. Has your business been affected by the COVID - 19 pandemic? If Yes how, if no why?
- ii. Has the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way you do business? If Yes how, if no why?
- iii. Do you face challenges as an SME compared to large enterprises?
- iv. If yes in the above, how do these challenges affect your business? If no, how do you cope with competitions from large enterprises?
- v. Do you feel there are lessons you can learn from the COVID-19 pandemic concerning how business can be managed? If yes how, if no why?
- vi. In your understanding, what is social media?
- vii. Do you use social media for your business?
- viii. What social media tools do you use for business?
- ix. What are some of the benefits of using social media for business?
- x. How has your business been affected by the use of SM as a marketing strategy?
- xi. Do you face challenges while using SM as a marketing strategy? If Yes how, if no why?
- xii. Is SM useful for you during the Covid-19 Pandemic?
- xiii. How do you use SM during the pandemic and what are its benefits?
- xiv. How did a change in using Social Media tools affect your business during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - a. Do you feel there are recommendations which can be adopted to make the use of SM more effective for SMEs?

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent Form

Research Title - "An exploration of the role of Social Media Marketing for Irish SMEs during the COVID-19 Pandemic"

College- Griffith College Dublin

Investigator- Tallisa Delailah Van-Gelder
Tallisadelailah.van-geldere@student.griffith.ie

This research will explore whether social media marketing is a viable solution to helping businesses thrive under such events like the COVID – 19 where human contact is restricted. The researcher will explore how businesses were affected by COVID –19 and whether Social Media Marketing is playing a role in helping businesses continue doing business and to what extent, what type of businesses were most affected by COVID – 19 and how did they respond to the pandemic.

This is a qualitative study I plan to conduct face to face interviews but with the situation at present (COVID- 19), I will have to change to phone interviews which are estimated to last 30 to 45mins.

Please complete the following (circle Yes or No for each question)

1. I have read the plain language Statement (or had it read to me) **Yes/No**
2. I understand the information provided **Yes/No**
3. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study **Yes/No**
4. I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions **Yes / No**
5. I am aware that my interview will be audiotaped **Yes/ No**

I Confirm that that the research study is voluntary I may withdraw from research study at any point.

All data information collected shall be confidential and stored with the college after research has been done. This research is strictly for academic purpose.

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participants Signature: *Camillat Mashaun*

Name in Block Capitals: CAMILLAT MASHAUN

Witness: Tallisa Van-Geldere

Date: 22/07/2020

Appendix C: Camilla's Transcribed Interview

Question One: How is your business affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic?

Response: We provide hair extension and also make wigs and when we make wigs we either post them to our customers or they come for one-to-one services. We usually engage in one-to-one services where we could have about six people in our space in a day, but then it had to stop completely. So yes it has affected business because we don't have customers coming into our space because we have to comply with the regulations. However, we are able to send our products out to customers. So, the pandemic has affected the physical presence of the customer, but now that it is lifted, the rules and regulations till needs to be observed.

Question Two: Were you able to keep the same customers?

Response: Yes, we were able to. Some customers do not really mind us posting their items, but a lot of customers cannot do it at home themselves. So, some do not want their products shipped to them, they would prefer one-to-one service, while others are willing to have it shipped and then have an online zoom class on how to install it.

Question Three: Do you face challenges in competing with the large enterprises that are into the same business?

Response: For larger enterprises it might be difficult for them, but I am a small business, a sole trader so I only have two people working for me, so it is still safe for me to meet my employees. We also have direct communication via the different social media platforms whereas the larger enterprises have a large group of employees who are at home, so the larger enterprises losses more money. However, in some cases, the government would rather support the larger enterprises to regain losses compared to a sole trader like me.

Question Four: How do these challenges affect your business as a sole trader?

Response: I am able to cope because I can adapt to change. I have also been able to learn how to manage my business during this period from many online classes.

Question Five: Do you feel there are lessons that can be learned from the Covid-19 pandemic concerning how business can be managed?

Response: Yes. It is important that we adapt to change, and we need to make the most out of social media and the pandemic has taught me that services are not only offered face-to-face. You can also build relationships with your customers online. It has also changed the way I operate my business as I can also work with my employees online. I can also do my business with people in other areas of the world. I also run online classes which also brings in more money.

Question Six: In your understanding what is social media?

Response: Social media is basically your selling point. You have to make the most of it. It is the most important selling point for your business. So social media has helped me present my business to people online.

Question Seven: What social media tool do you use for your business?

Response: I use Instagram, Facebook, and twitter. For me, Instagram has been the most effective one. Instagram is now linked to Facebook and whatever I post on Instagram is also going to Facebook and it has been a huge game-changer. They help boost the business.

Question Eight: What are some of the benefits of using social media for business?

Response: Through social media, you are literally showcasing your products and it is also a way for customers to feel safe when ordering. People can comment, you get feedback, reviews and so on. So even if customers have not met you before, your social media speaks for itself.

Question Nine: How has your business been affected using social media as a business strategy?

Response: It has been affected greatly. It has helped with visibility; customers can now find me easily. It has been a huge marketing tool for me.

Question Ten: Do you face challenges while using social media as a marketing tool?

Response: Yes, I do, because every single time content creation changes. People do not have the patience anymore, so the contents posted needs to be eye-catching. So, a major challenge is coming up with contents to attract the right audience. So, if the content is not attractive, it will be skipped.

Question Eleven: Is your social media use during the pandemic?

Response: Absolutely. It is useful in the sense that I have been able to gain students and more visibility. Social media makes it easy to get customers.

Question Twelve: Did the use of social media tool change your business?

Response: It definitely did, because with social media have made me engage with my customers and know the kind of things they are looking for. So social media has helped change the way I attend to customers.

Question Thirteen: What recommendations would you give to make the use of social media more effective for businesses?

Response: I used YouTube to learn how to navigate the social media handle and how to engage customers because the number of followers on social media does not necessarily equate to the profit gotten, so business workers need to find a way to create interest in the customers.